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AN OLD FRISIAN POEM

Everyone who has read Old Frisian must have noticed the frequent occurrence of alliterative expressions. That these expressions often form lines of alliterative verse is a fact that has been commented on.¹ But no one, so far as I know, has pointed out the existence in Old Frisian of a complete poem. And yet there it is as plain as a pikestaff. It stands out from the legal phraseology by which it is surrounded like an oasis in the desert. It is found in the Emsiger text, in a description of the circumstances under which a mother may sell or pawn the inheritance of her fatherless child, as an expansion of the third case of need: *huuversa thet kind is stoknakad ieftha huslas*. As given by Heuser, *Altfries. Lesebuch*, pp. 86 f., it reads:

Thenna thi u thiustera nacht and thi nedtkalda winter ur tha thuner hleth, sa farther alra monna hwelic inna sin hof and inna sin hus, and theth wilde diar secht thene hola bam and thera berga hli, alder hit sin lif on behalde; sa weniath thet vniereghe barn and werpth thenna tha sine nakeda lite and sin huuslase and sinne feder, ther him reda scholde with thene winther kalda and with thene heta hunghe, theth hi sa diape and sa dimme is vnder eke and vnder eerthe bislaghen and biseten and bitacht.

As it stands it is not altogether in correct poetic form, but it is poetic in language and feeling. That at an earlier time it was also correct in form there can be no doubt. Heyne, *Germ.*, IX, 441, recognized two alliterative lines:

thiu neilthiustera nacht and thi nēdkalda winter
and

. . . . and thet wilde diar
sēcht thene hola bām and thera berga hlī.

He might easily have indicated others, for the entire poem can, with little change, be reconstructed as follows:

¹ Cf. especially Heyne, *Germ.*, IX, 437-44; Siebs, *Pauls Grundriss*, II, 495 I.

thenna thiū neflthiūstera nácht and thi nédkálða wínter
 ūr tha tūnar hléth, sa farther alra mónna hwélic
 inna sīn hóf and inna sīn hūs, alder hi sīn lff on bihálde,
 and thet wílde diār secht thene hóla bām and thera bérge hlíf:
 sa wéníath thet nérighe bárn and wēpth tha sīne nákedra líthi
 and sīn hūslāse and sīnne féder, ther hine hrédde with thene winter
 kálða and with thene hēta húngher,
 thet hi sa diāpe bislāghen and sa dímme bislétan
 is únder éke and under érthe bithácht.

How close this arrangement comes to the original it is, of course, impossible to decide. But it could hardly have been much different. The fourth line as given above may originally have been two lines, as:

and thet wílde diār sécht sīne wóninge
 in tha hóla bāme and thera bérge hlíf.

Or:

and thet wílde diār secht tō wóninge thene hóla bām
 and thera bérge hlíf, alder hit sīn lff on bihálde.

Compare the MLG version:

dath wylde deerte secht de berge in tho flucht und sine wanunge under dem
 halen bhome.

Or without a change in the MS the third and fourth lines may read:

inna sīn hóf and inna sīn hūs, and thet wílde diār secht thene hóla bām
 and thera bérge hlíf, alder hit sīn lff on bihálde.

The sixth line above may properly be a swell-verse like the fifth. But with the change of one word it can be written in two lines:

and sīn hūslāse and sīnne féder, ther hine hrédde
 with thene wínter hērda and with thene hēta húngher.

Or, to make it more like the MS:

and sīn hūslāse and sīnne féder, ther hine hrédra skólde, etc.

For the last two lines we might have:

thet hi sa diāpe under érthe and sa dímme under éke
 is nū bislāghen and bislétan and bithácht.

This poem could not have been written for the place in which it is found. It must have originated several centuries earlier and indicates that the Frisians, like the other Germanic tribes, had a poetic spirit and a facile use of alliterative verse. It is complete in itself, a finished product of no mean merit, worthy to live in the light of the world.

The few slight changes made in the words are amply justified. For *thiustera* I read with Heyne *neilthiustera* as it occurs elsewhere.¹ Compare NFris. *neiltsjuster* 'pikdonker, volslagen duister' (*Friesch Wb.*, II, 192). On *hlēth* 'breitet eine Decke' cf. Siebs, *Pauls Grundriss*, I², 1306. For *uniēreghe* 'minderjährig,' a natural corruption in this case, I write **nērighe* 'hard pressed, in straitened circumstances,' the forerunner of NFris. *nearich* 'druk, wemelende van mensen,' 'crowded,' whence *nearichheit* 'moeilijkheid, benarde omstandigheden, geldnood.' This is a derivative of *near* 'naar, treurig, nauw, eng,' OE *nearo* 'narrow, causing hardship, distress,' *near-wian* 'confine, compress, hard press, afflict,' OFris. *benēra* id. Richt-hofen's emendation of *werpth* to *wēpth* is here adopted as making the only good sense. The MS reading *ther him rēda scholde* 'der ihm raten (helfen) sollte' is plainly a corruption of *ther hine hredda skolde* (or *hredde*) 'der ihn retten sollte' (cf. Richt-hofen, *Altfries. Wb.* 986). For *biseten*, which is hardly an appropriate word here, I write *bisleten* 'beschlossen, verschlossen' in agreement with W. 47, 16: *onder ēke ende onder da erda bisloten*.

[Translation]

When murky night and mist-cold winter
On the fields down fall, and fare all men
To the sheltering roof to shield them from death,
And the wild-beast hies to the hollow tree
Or lays him down in a den in the rocks:
Then weeps the child of want when winter chills his limbs,
And homeless bewails the father, who should ward from him hunger
and cold,
And mourns that so deep he is lying, so darkly shut from the light,
Under the oaken board and burdened by the earth.

¹ See Richt-hofen, *Altfries. Wb.* 948.

Of many other alliterative lines that might be quoted one group is noteworthy as it contains four complete lines, with a fifth easily filled out. This is found in W. 441, 18, 19:

Aéster to da Wísere ende wéster toe da Flée,
 út mitta ébbe ende óp mitta flóed,
 om datse dine ówirra wáriet *toienst dat wilde héf*
 defs ende náchtis, toienst dyn nóerdkóninck
 ende toienst dyn wílda wísingh mitta fýf wépen.

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